

FROM LIDDY WITH LOVE

OUT OF CONTROL. By G. Gordon Liddy. 305 pages. St. Martin's. \$10.95.

I've never been able to muster much sympathy for the "Don't Buy Books by Crooks" lobby. Take their argument to its logical extreme and you'll find yourself chastely averting your eyes from the works of Villon, Defoe and O. Henry. Crooks are uniquely qualified to tell us about crookedness, which has always been fiction's principal theme. Now that the Iron Man of Watergate has finally broken his silence, we may surely be forgiven our attentiveness. Gordon Liddy has written a novel. It will do you no good to insist that Nixon, Haldeman and their friends wrote fiction too, for this really is a novel, a thriller as gaudy as any Ian Fleming ever committed to print. Two questions immediately present themselves: Does it shed any light on Watergate? Is it a passable thriller? The answers are no and yes.

Nevertheless, in what I take to be a meretricious ploy, Liddy implies in his opening scene that he will tell us what we want to know. A former FBI agent, as dedicated to personal discipline as his author ever was, burgles the headquarters of a multinational conglomerate—all in the service of his country, of course, and hence no crime at all. But after some authoritative lore on lock-picking and safecracking, Liddy kills him off, and the rest is fantasy. About this rest, I'll try to be brief. The head of the conglomerate, Gregory Ballinger, is a KGB general whose mission is to acquire key elements of American industry for Soviet control. To confirm this skulduggery, the CIA engages a former intelligence agent turned playboy and financial wizard, Richard Rand. Rand attempts to put the screws on Ballinger by pitting his millions against the Russian's billions. The contest is not as unequal as it seems because Rand, through his dead wife, is connected to the Mafia; through his Chinese mistress, he is connected to "the consolidated Tongs."

So many Sicilians and Chinese, with their talent for underwriting scams and maiming opponents, prove useful to Rand when Ballinger and the CIA try to kill him. The CIA, you must understand, doesn't really want to play hardball with the Russians; only Rand grasps the real threat: "We opted for prayer and peanut butter while they opted for *panzers*, so we lose . . . What it's all about is big fish eat little fish and the only thing that counts in this world is power and the will to use it." There, I think, we hear the authentic voice of the author of the Gemstone plan.

RED BELT: Enough of plot. Like any real author, Liddy writes about what he knows. A student of the martial arts, he offers a "massive Mongol," a red-belt master of the high T'ai Chi. A gun fanatic, he lets his hero think it "more comforting to fall asleep holding the cold butt of a pistol than the warm breast of a woman." Having once held his hand in a candle's flame, Rand explains, "There are some things about being a man that transcend logic."

What are spy stories anyway but the fulfillment of boyish fantasies? Liddy tried out his fantasies in the political arena and failed; here he has done rather better. This book is sure to make a lot of money; I hope his next will be about a plumber who persuades some politicians to let him enact a truly outrageous plan to undermine the opposition.

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